

Community Supported Fisheries: *Turning the CSA to the Sea*

BY PETER SMITH

On Sunday morning, Kim Libby's pickup is laden with totes of Maine shrimp, fresh off the 57-foot dragger boat, the *Leslie & Jessica*. Libby trucks the catch to the snowy parking lot of the First Universalist Church in Rockland, where 40 customers are waiting for a share of the harvest.

It's part of a cooperative effort by fishermen in Port Clyde, who have banded together with the hopes of saving their working waterfront community. This year, they've started selling investments in a relatively new venture: the Community Supported Fishery (CSF).



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Shrimp fishing has long sustained groundfishing boats in the winter months, but as stocks dwindle and global markets drive market prices down, Maine's groundfishing fleet has been in a steady decline.

"We're basically fishing ourselves out of existence," said Craig Pendleton, a Saco shrimp fisherman and former coordinating director of the political advocacy group, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance.

Faced with tough federal quotas, high fuel costs, rising waterfront real estate prices, and declining wholesale prices, fishermen say they need to learn how to make more money on less fish. "Everything's going up except the price of the product," said Kim Libby, manager of the Port Clyde Draggermen's Cooperative.

The story of the fishing industry mirrors that of the family farmer, whose numbers have sunk dramatically since the 1930s. Consequently, the nation's food supply consolidates in the hands of fewer producers and processors, who tend to control the market. This year, Maine's processors have been buying shrimp for a little more than 50 cents a pound. "The processor's saying, 'We're giving

you a fair price,'" Libby said. "But there's no way to prove it. We wish we could get more for our product."

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Spurred by fishery and farm advocacy groups, the Port Clyde fishermen decided to take their catch directly to consumers this year, starting with a shrimp share at Rockland's First Universalist church. For a \$189 investment, consumers receive 10 pounds of fresh, head-on Maine shrimp for 14 weeks—a cost of \$1.35 a pound.

The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model has sustained smaller farms across the U.S., increasing from three in 1986 to well over 1,000 today. Maine now has over 80 CSA farms, according to Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association.

"The idea was going to be adopted by fisheries one way or another," said Robert Snyder, Vice President of Programs at the nonprofit Island Institute. "We hope there's a great appetite for sustainably-caught, local seafood."

While the CSA model has been used to distribute vegetables, raw milk and poultry, it has only recently been applied to seafood direct marketing programs in North Carolina, Alaska, and Maine.

In Rockland, church leaders said they had success distributing vegetable CSA shares with Hatchet Cove Farms in Friendship and began looking for other ways to support the local food community.

They found the Port Clyde Draggermen's Co-op and began weekly shrimp distributions on December 23.

"You know that you're going to receive shrimp that were caught, at most, the day before, so they're guaranteed fresh," Lucie Bauer, a church organizer, said. "You don't necessarily know that when you go to the market."

Besides freshness, the economics also make sense for both the fisherman, who would be getting about a third of the price from a processor, and consumers, who would be paying slightly more at the supermarket.

Still, Community Supported Fisheries face some significant hurdles. "The average consumer doesn't know what to do with a whole head-on fish," said Jennifer Plummer, a Northwest Atlantic Marine Association administrative coordinator. "And I don't think a fisherman who's spent 18 hours on the water wants to do public relations and hand out his product to consumers."

Expanding a CSF to include New England's groundfish stock—pollock, hagfish or skate—would also require some

consumer education. Others say the state's web of regulatory hoops for distributing raw, unprocessed seafood to consumers is prohibitive.

The biggest challenge may be overcoming the public perception that fishermen deplete the oceans, clearcut large swaths of virgin sea bottom, and dump millions of unwanted fish, or by-catch. Fishermen say some of this is true. But Libby says the small, diversified Port Clyde fleet is working on changes to their fishing nets to prevent by-catch and would like to become the first biodiesel-powered fishing fleet in the world.

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